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C O N F I D E N T I A L PRAGUE 001154

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FOR DEFENSE SECRETARY GATES

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TAGS: [OVIP](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [PGOV](#) [NATO](#) [EZ](#)
SUBJECT: SCENESETTER FOR VISIT OF DEFENSE SECRETARY GATES
TO PRAGUE

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Mary Thompson-Jones for reasons 1.4 b+d

¶1. (C) Your October 23 visit to Prague will be important to our effort to win Czech approval of our missile defense (MD) proposals, and to generally solidify the partnership with a key U.S. ally. While MD is likely to dominate discussions with government officials and members of parliament, you should also plan to discuss Czech contributions in Iraq and Afghanistan, and exchange views on European issues, including developments in Russia and Kosovo.

Domestic context

¶2. (C) Nearly 18 years after the 1989 Velvet Revolution, the Czech Republic today is a prosperous market economy, a stable democracy, and a committed American ally. Accession to the European Union in 2004, like accession to NATO in 1999, has solidified and accelerated the transition away from the country's communist past. The economy today is very strong and one of Europe's fastest growing, with 6% GDP growth in the past two years, low inflation, and declining unemployment. Strong exports and continued healthy inflows of foreign investment drive the economy.

¶3. (C) Elections in June 2006 produced a deadlock with the 200-seat Chamber of Deputies split evenly between left and right. The country was without a confirmed government for seven months while the politicians sorted out a compromise. In January PM Topolánek won a vote of confidence with the help of two defectors from the opposition. Topolánek heads the center-right Civic Democrats (ODS) and governs together with the smaller Christian Democrats and the Czech Greens. Both because it lacks a reliable majority in Parliament and because of internal conflicts among coalition partners -- particularly involving the Greens -- the long-term stability of the Topolánek government is far from certain. The Social Democrats (CSSD), led by former Prime Minister Jiri Paroubek, are an active opposition party, but have so far refrained from any attempt to bring down the government. Paroubek has sent signals that, in return for assuming the position of Speaker of Parliament, he is interested in cooperating with the ODS-led government. While many scenarios are possible going forward, most observers expect the current government will remain in power at least through the Czech EU Presidency in 2009.

¶4. (C) President Vaclav Klaus, in office since February 2003 and up for re-election early next year, is the most popular politician in the country. He is the founder and honorary

chair of ODS. He does not have a good relationship with PM Topolanek. Klaus is a former economist and father of the economic reforms launched in the early 1990s. He is a devoted libertarian with a passion for individual liberty and free markets; he recently caused a stir by lashing out against global warming as a new orthodoxy limiting personal freedom. He is instinctively pro-American. While he does not hesitate to criticize USG policies with which he disagrees (most famously, Klaus was a critic the 2003 invasion of Iraq), he feels at home with Americans and travels there frequently to lecture.

Czech-U.S. relations

¶5. (C) Our two countries enjoy excellent relations. We have worked very well with both of the main parties to pursue common goals. The country is active within NATO and the EU, and generally supportive of U.S. policies. This is particularly the case regarding democracy promotion. The Czechs are our strongest partners in Europe on Cuba, and active supporters of the democratic opposition in Cuba. Likewise in Belarus, Burma, Iraq and other countries in transition, the Czech government and NGOs work to support peaceful transformation and pass along the lessons learned from their own history. Prague has been home to the U.S.-funded Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty since 1995, and has actively supported broadcasts to countries in Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Middle East.

Missile defense

¶6. (C) The USG has been discussing potential cooperation with the Czechs on our ballistic missile defense program since ¶2002. We informed the Czechs in January this year that we wanted to begin negotiations on a radar at a site they had offered on the Brdy military facility not far from Prague. The Czech government reaction was immediate and positive, with the newly confirmed Topolanek government calling a press conference the next day to announce the news and promising to work with us. We launched negotiations in May and hope to conclude agreements by the end of the year.

¶7. (C) The politics of MD in the Czech Republic are complicated: Topolanek's ODS strongly supports; the small Christian Democrats are less solidly behind the proposal; the Green party is openly skeptical and is currently not considered fully reliable on the vote that will take place next year on the negotiated agreements. The Social Democrats are generally opposed; despite Chairman Paroubek's consistent rhetoric against MD, in private meetings he has left the door open to his party providing some support in the end. Paroubek will visit Washington next month, on a trip organized by the MDA, which will include extensive briefings designed to counter Paroubek's assertion that the missile threat from the Middle East is not real. President Klaus has stated that he supports the negotiations moving forward, and in theory supports the radar deployment, but will reserve final judgment until all the details are negotiated; he is unlikely to take a strong public stand prior to the February presidential elections.

¶8. (C) Polls show that the public is generally opposed to the radar. The most recent survey showed 49% of the public against, which is a noticeable improvement from the 60-70% disapproval ratings in the first half of 2007. Although only some 20% support the radar, we are encouraged that over half of those opposing said they could see supporting the radar if they had more information. Our priority, and that of the Czech government's MD communication team under Tomas Klvana, is to provide as much information as possible for Czechs to make an informed decision. Recent months have seen clear success in refuting misinformation and providing assurances related to the health and environmental impacts of the radar. A major focus going forward will be to ensure a strong

linkage between the U.S. MD system and NATO. This is particularly important to win the support of skeptics among the Greens and Social Democrats, and could be one of the key issues on which the vote in parliament hinges. Obtaining a strong declaration at the April Bucharest NATO Summit is a top priority, and explains why the Czechs intend to delay a vote in parliament until the spring.

¶9. (C) Given the lack of a stable parliamentary majority for the coalition, plus doubts about MD among some members of the coalition, we will continue to focus much of our attention on parliament. You will have coffee during your visit with a group of key parliamentary leaders and members. Some are supporters, but most are thoughtful skeptics who we believe may eventually vote in favor. The coffee will be a chance for you to present an overview of how MD fits into the broader USG view of transatlantic security arrangements, offer some thoughts from your recent talks in Moscow, and take questions. Among the points to stress with this group: the urgency of the threat to the U.S. and Europe; commitment to linking the U.S. MD system with NATO; commitment to balanced negotiations with the Czech Republic and full sharing of information about health and other concerns; commitment to working with Russia to address their concerns (but without providing a veto); bipartisan political support in the U.S. for MD; appreciation for Czech willingness to host MD assets and Czech contributions to war on terror.

¶10. (C) The saber rattling from Moscow has not had a significant impact on Czech public opinion. If anything, it tends to increase support by reminding Czechs of the importance of a strong transatlantic tie to balance an increasingly aggressive Russia. The Czechs support our current approach to Russia: taking seriously their concerns and working with them, but not granting Moscow a veto over Czech foreign policy decisions. The Czech government would appreciate a read out from your recent 2 2 talks in Moscow. They are particularly interested in our on-going negotiations with Moscow and the impact of the possible use of the Qabala radar on the proposed facility in the Czech Republic.

Iraq and Afghanistan

¶11. (C) The Czechs remain active supporters in the war on terror. They currently have approximately 100 troops in Iraq, around 230 in Afghanistan, and close to 500 in the Balkans. The 2008 deployment plan now being debated within the government envisions maintaining the 100 troops in Basra, although the Czechs are considering a request, made recently by DASD Cagan, to increase the deployment in Iraq to 120. There is concern within the government that an increase in Iraq, at the same time that the U.S. and UK are planning to draw down, would not win support in the divided parliament. This could also disrupt the Czechs' main goal for 2008: standing up the first PRT in Logar province, Afghanistan. The government has approved the PRT with a target start date of mid-March 2008. They plan an active civilian component, and will send an advance team to Logar -- where they will partner with the U.S. TF DIABLO at FOB SHANK -- in late October. Obtaining necessary armored vehicles is critical to the success of the PRT. During her recent visit, DASD Cagan promised to try to provide up to twenty HMMWV (Type 1151), as well as lift and sustain support, for the PRT. Ms. Cagan also asked the Czechs to send troops to support the Dutch in Uruzgan, Afghanistan; the Czechs are currently discussing this possibility with the Dutch.

Defense budget and other issues

¶12. (C) In general, we hope you will use your visit to thank the Czechs for their strong support of U.S. foreign policy goals, including on missile defense, war on terror, and support for democracy. One point you should make to the

Czechs is their defense budget. The growth in defense spending in recent years has lagged behind economic growth, and as a result is projected to be below 1.5% of GDP in 2008.

With the debate on the 2008 budget just starting, a clear message on the importance of meeting NATO defense spending targets could help to shift the debate in favor of those supporting more robust defense spending.

13. (C) Other issues that may come up during your meetings:

-- Kosovo: The Czechs support USG positions on the future of Kosovo. They will recognize an independent Kosovo, should talks fail to reach a mutual agreement in December, but intend to wait for a larger EU member to recognize first.

-- Energy security: The Czechs, and the prime minister in particular, are very concerned about energy security and the reliability of Russian supplies. The Czechs get all of their gas, and 70% of their oil, from Russia. They would like to see both the EU and NATO be more engaged on this question.

-- Visa waiver: Congress in August passed legislation to reform the U.S. visa waiver program, partially meeting the President's request to modernize the visa waiver program to permit swift entry by close allies like the Czechs. The Czech Republic is one of the few countries currently meeting the criteria imposed by Congress. However, as leaders of a regional effort to bring in all of the Central European EU members, the Czechs have continued to press for more flexibility in the legislation. The President has stated he will seek such flexibility. Meanwhile, we are encouraging the Czechs to work with DHS on meeting requirements under existing legislation.

-- Topolanek visit to U.S.: PM Topolanek hopes to visit Washington in the coming months. He has proposed a visit in December. Based on NSC feedback, we are encouraging the Czechs to delay this until February.

-- EU Presidency: The Czech government is increasingly focused on their first EU Presidency, during the first half of 2009. They follow the French Presidency.

-- UN Security Council: On October 16 the Czechs lost in their bid for a seat on the Security Council. Croatia won the seat for this region.

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